



Ceramics as an archaeology of the contemporary past

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Edited by
Andrew Livingstone and Kevin Petrie

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CERAMICS AS AN ARCHAEOLOGY OF THE CONTEMPORARY PAST

Christopher McHugh

Introduction

This paper will argue that a socially-engaged ceramic practice may have much in common with the aims of current archaeological approaches to investigating the recent or contemporary past. Both endeavours can be regarded as forms of 'creative materialising intervention' in that they may result in the constitution of an otherwise absent material culture, 'thereby expanding the scope of discursive culture' (Buchli and Lucas 2001a, p. 15–17). This will be illustrated by reference to my own practice-based research undertaken between 2010 and 2014 as part of a collaborative doctoral project at the University of Sunderland and Sunderland Museum & Winter Gardens (SMWG). Responding to the museum's collection of nineteenth century Sunderland lustreware pottery, this project sought to engage and reflect the contemporary community of Sunderland through the creation of a series of ceramic art works and museum displays.

In particular, I will discuss two examples of ceramic artworks I made after holding a focus group and reminiscence activity with a group of eleven Wearside-born soldiers from Third Battalion, The Rifles (3 Rifles). Taking the rich military and naval imagery of Sunderland pottery as a precedent, and concentrating on their embodied experiences and commemorative practices, the project invited the participants to discuss how their tour in Afghanistan, as part of Operation Herrick 11 (2009–10), might be remembered in ceramic.

One of the premises of my approach is that ceramic objects have the potential to remedy the widely observed and problematised 'forgetfulness' (e.g. Nora 1989, Connerton 2009) and dematerialisation (e.g. Renfrew 2003) associated with the current age. As enduring forms of 'external symbolic storage' (Renfrew 2003, p. 188), they may act as material conduits through which ephemeral aspects of human-object relations can be disinterred and manifested. As will be discussed, rather than replicating the problematic of modernity by simply moving the responsibility of remembering to monumental sites of forgetfulness, the challenge of such a project is to explore how these 'micro-local sites of memory' (Kidron 2009, p.5) may then go on to become socially constituted as active loci of creative remembrance.

Archaeologies of the contemporary past

According to archaeologists Rodney Harrison and John Schofield (2010, p.7), the increasing use of archaeological approaches to understand the contemporary past is a reaction to communal forgetting caused

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by increasingly rapid technological and social change. This means that the 'recent past seems to recede' and become 'obscured at a rate not known before in human history'. These archaeologies, therefore, are motivated by 'a desire to reconcile ourselves with a recent history that moves at such great speed that we feel both remote from it and disoriented by its passage' (ibid., p.8). Victor Buchli and Gavin Lucas (2001a, p.14), early proponents of a socially-engaged archaeology of the recent and contemporary past, have argued that the abundance of material culture in the present leads to an 'excess of information', which can obscure more marginal histories almost as much as a dearth of evidence.

Although there may be a general feeling that documentary evidence and personal experience render archaeology unnecessary for the examination of our own era (Schofield and Johnson 2006, p. 106), archaeologists of these periods hold that there are always aspects of human behaviour which exist 'outside discourse, unconstituted' and which would remain 'inarticulate' without a materialising archaeological practice (Buchli and Lucas 2001a, p. 12–14). Prehistorian Colin Renfrew (2003, p. 188–189) has warned that the increasing digital expression of symbolic aspects of material culture is resulting in the gradual 'dematerialization of the real world', meaning a future 'archaeology of mind' may be difficult. This 'flood' of electronic information is no longer possible to handle other than through electronic devices (Connerton 2009, p. 124). While digital media have the potential to store memory in a more inclusive and participatory nature (Olsen et al 2012, p. 132), their ability to constitute 'potential memory' for future re-interpretations of the past is contingent upon their durability, which is still open to question (ibid., p. 134). This potential fragility is eloquently illustrated by Ezra Shales' (2013, p. 20–21) observation that, if they were only brought back to life by skilled labour, the one hundred-year old plaster moulds left at the former Spode ceramics factory in Stoke-on-Trent have more potential to be viable carriers of memory than the 'antediluvian computers stacked like logs of wood into closets' at the same site.

Ranging from the traumatic recovery of remains of the 'disappeared' from sites of modern genocide (Crossland 2002) to socially-engaged 'excavations' of 1990s council houses (Buchli and Lucas 2001c), these studies tend to be characterised by a focus on 'the quotidian, the overlooked and 'taken for granted' [through which] the traces of subaltern voices and experience can be constituted' (Buchli and Lucas 2001a, p. 14). These approaches, then, seek to 'presence absence' by 'bringing forward or indeed materialising that which is excessive, forgotten or concealed' (Buchli and Lucas 2001d, p. 171). Through this 'mattering' – making things matter physically and conceptually – these archaeologies, it is argued, may play a role in challenging authoritarian discourses of dominance.

Here, archaeology is construed as an inherently creative enterprise where the past is constituted in the present, both conceptually and materially, rather than being a process where pre-determined givens are simply 'discovered' by excavators (Buchli and Lucas 2001a, p. 16–17). In this way, Greg Stevenson (2001, p. 61), talking about twentieth-century ceramics, likens archaeology to a 'design history of the everyday', where 'social relationships, stories and narratives of how things might have been' are 'designed' by archaeologists in the present. Similarly, Angela Piccini and Cornelius Holtorf (2009, p. 11) argue that, 'like artists, archaeologists actively shape materials in a process of transformation' when they excavate and interpret the past. In this way, both archaeology and art employ a variety of approaches and techniques to make meaning out of material and 'have in common a combination of lab- and field-based practices with material story-telling' (ibid., p. 13).

In, for example, ceramicist Neil Brownsword's re-fired ceramic detritus recovered from pottery sites around Stoke-on-Trent, we can see a similar desire to dramatise, and pay homage to, overlooked and undervalued signs of human labour through creative practice. As he explains,

The cast clay spares vigorously removed from a mould, or marks remaining on a palette from repetitious lapping motions of mixing enamel, go unnoticed as they possess no inherent value.

The extraordinary qualities of these material by-products emphasise an individual expression that lies in stark contrast to the effects of standardisation that have rendered evidence of human contact an imperfection. They expose a greater insight into the entirety of each process and the innate knowledge of material, command and timing embedded in each craftsman. (Brownsword 2006, Chapter 5, p. 3)

While the outcomes and methods may differ in that archaeology recovers otherwise ignored material culture and the creative ceramic practice to be described in this paper makes it through an engagement with a museum collection and associated community, there appears to be much commonality in the aims of the two disciplines. Both attempt to raise awareness of overlooked or hidden narratives of human-object interaction through the constitution of a new material culture – archaeology through its ‘critical empiricism’ (Buchli and Lucas 2001d, p. 172) and ceramics through its ability to materialise and dramatise – and, consequently, both can perhaps be described in terms of the ‘creative materialising intervention’ Buchli and Lucas (2001a, p. 17) aspire to. Ultimately, as archaeologist Laurent Olivier (2001, p. 187) highlights, by making new things we are adding to the archaeological record as ‘all manifestations that bear witness, physically, to human activity are, by their nature, concerned with archaeology.’

Why ceramics?

As ceramic objects are familiar due to our long association with clay vessels, durable, and capable of carrying a range of meaningful contextual information in form and surface design, ceramic practice provides a particularly suitable means by which ephemeral narratives can be manifested through a process of materialisation. Although it is possible that almost any form of artistic output might enter the archaeological record, it is perhaps ceramics which combine accessibility with the most potential for endurance. Ceramic artist Stephen Dixon argues that ceramic has both charted the development of human civilisation and been central to the development of sculpture due to its material qualities of ‘durability, versatility and universality’, combined with its ability to carry narrative information:

Fired clay, although fragile in comparison with some other sculptural materials, is permanent and durable. It will not perish, rot, dissolve or be consumed by animal or insect. Its colours will not fade. Its lack of material value means it will not be melted down for re-use. Ceramic is therefore a uniquely important material for the historian and the archaeologist, for piecing together the narratives of civilisation. (Dixon 2012, p. 3–4)

As Glenn Adamson (2009, p. 36) notes, it is both the fragility of ceramic objects as well as the ultimate durability of their sherds which make them ‘our most reliable evidence of human endeavour’, arguing that a ‘smashed and discarded ceramic pot literally kills time as it waits to be discovered’, providing ‘a cultural trace that transports a sense of immediacy across the centuries.’

In his discussion of the importance objects play in both ‘inscriptive’ and ‘habitual’ memory practices, archaeologist Bjørnar Olsen (2010, p. 160) contends that it is their ‘durability’ and ‘in-place-ness’ which situates the past within the present, providing us with a sense of ‘ontological security’ (ibid., p. 121). Objects often outlast their human makers and users, accumulating over time. These ‘intrinsic gathering and enduring capacities of materials’ (ibid., p. 110) are particularly true of ceramic objects which may survive as fragments or be treasured as heirlooms or museum objects, both presencing the past in the present and carrying it into the future.

The archival potential of ceramic has led to ‘time capsule’ initiatives like Memory of Mankind, an online service where participants can upload digital information which is then turned into a decal and preserved by being fired on to stoneware tablets. This ceramic archive will be stored for posterity in a salt mine in Hallstatt, Austria (MOM 2015).

Distributed objects

Although anthropologist Alfred Gell’s (1998) work on how objects may extend and distribute the agency of their maker or commissioner has been subject to much debate (see Chua and Elliott 2013), his treatment of artistic oeuvre seems to offer a convincing way of regarding a museum collection, uniting individual agency with wider contexts. Gell (1998, p. 222) contended that there is an ‘isomorphy of structure’ between the ‘internal’ cognitive world of the artist and the way it is manifest externally as the artist’s oeuvre of ‘spatio-temporal structures of distributed objects’. Following from this, he argued that ‘what people are externally (and collectively) is a kind of enlarged replication of what they are internally’ (ibid.). Here, humans are not confined to the spatial or temporal limits of their body, ‘but consist of a spread of biographical events and memories of events, and a dispersed category of material objects, traces and leavings, which can be attributed to a person and which, in aggregate, testify to agency and patienthood during a biographical career which may, indeed, prolong itself long after biological death’ (ibid.). As a result, a work of art or craft can be seen to embody something of the mind and will of its maker, which, in turn, may go on to influence others.

As an example, Gell (ibid., p. 221) described a china dinner set, typical of that made by Spode, Wedgwood or, indeed, one of the Sunderland potteries, as a series of objects, each with their own ‘micro-histories’, which come together to form a ‘distributed object’ manifesting the ‘intentional actions’ of the factory’s management and design team. If, as Tim Ingold (2000, p. 372) argues, even such mass-produced objects can each be seen as ‘originals’ rather than ‘replicas’, often displaying variation due to the ‘dynamics of making’, it is perhaps possible to discern in the Sunderland pottery collection, for instance, something of the agency of not only the pottery owners who commissioned it, but also of the workers, whose idiosyncratic application of transfers and pink lustre make each piece unique. The challenge of my project in Sunderland was to create a ‘distributed object’ which referenced the history of the collection, whilst also communicating something of contemporary Sunderland and its inhabitants.

Public and private monuments

Public memorials have often been problematised as forms of forgetting where lived memory is replaced by a constructed nostalgia. Historian Pierre Nora (1989, p. 7) has criticised such sites as materialised forms of forgetting ‘where memory crystallizes and secretes itself’, rather than existing as a lived, active practice. For Nora, by the time sites of historical significance (*lieux de mémoire*) are identified as such, they have already ceased to be loci of dynamic memory practice (*milieux de mémoire*) where mnemonic activities underpin quotidian existence (Cubitt 2007, p. 244). Connerton (2009, p. 29) similarly argues that often the construction of monuments may encourage forgetfulness by conferring the responsibility of remembering to material culture, which may omit as much as it includes:

The relationship between memorials and forgetting is reciprocal: the threat of forgetting begets memorials and the construction of memorials begets forgetting. If giving monumental shape to what

we remember is to discard the obligation to remember, that is because memorials permit only some things to be remembered and, by exclusion, cause others to be forgotten. Memorials conceal the past as much as they cause us to remember it. (Connerton 2009, p. 29)

According to Buchli and Lucas (2001b, p.80), in every memorial 'something has been left out or forgotten', while Connerton, makes a congruent point regarding how war memorials often fail to represent the individual experiences of the combatants:

They conceal the way people lived: where soldiers are directly represented in war memorials, their image is designed specifically to deny acts of violence and aggression. They conceal the way they died: the blood, the bits of body flying through the air, the stinking corpses lying unburied for months, all are omitted. [...] And they conceal the way people survive. (Connerton 2009, p. 29)

This omission may be officially sanctioned or the result of other dynamics, including self-censorship. For example, when asked how they wanted their tour in Afghanistan to be represented, it was notable that the soldiers who took part in my research did not necessarily want the grittier aspects of their experience to be included. According to Cubitt (2007, p. 199), whilst some personal narratives or mnemonic associations may become officially recognised through commemorative objects and practices, thereby gaining 'widespread currency', others may remain 'private or clandestine', or become the 'challenging alternatives' of a specific interest group. Reminiscence expert Bernie Arigho (2008, p. 206) likens people to museums with their own repositories of life experiences, some displayed to the public and others concealed or 'put to one side'.

Of course, inherent in my materialising approach is the danger of replicating this problematic of creating monumental sites of forgetting. My work with the soldiers sought to avoid this by taking marginal aspects of their experience which otherwise might not be represented by official commemorative practices and monumentalising them through materialisation in ceramic. In doing so, it was hoped that these private narratives would become accessible to the public through display, whilst also retaining their links to individual experience. Discussing objects the soldiers had used in Afghanistan during the reminiscence activity concentrated the conversation on external talking points, attempting to avoid potentially traumatic memory triggers and the emulation of the grand narratives of heroism so prevalent in the original Sunderland pottery. As Arigho advises (*ibid.*, p. 209), in memory work, 'It may be easier and more comforting to engage with a concrete external object than to immediately search inwardly for what may ultimately arise as especially cherished or defining life experiences.'

IED Brush

A series of dialogues emerged from the focus group which revealed how the soldiers had negotiated the trauma and rigours of the tour and its aftermath through a variety of person-object interactions. One soldier brought a domestic paint brush to the session which was inscribed with a tally of the number of improvised explosive devices (IEDs) he had found with it while route clearing in Afghanistan (see McHugh 2013). According to sociologist Kevin McSorley (2012, p. 53), the Vallon IED detector used by this soldier in conjunction with his brush is 'now the leading edge of the sensorium of contemporary patrol in Afghanistan', its use recorded through the helmet cameras of soldiers, where 'the footage has a singular, unwavering focus: the hands engaged in a deadly archaeology of delicately brushing away dirt and removing stones to reveal the invisible explosive traps'. The archaeological metaphor is apt as the soldier also contributed a knife which he had excavated, describing it as a 'special find' and musing about the narrative that had led to its burial next to a road.



Figure 66.1 Rifleman Hiles' IED Brush, photographed by Jo Howell, Jo Howell Photography (www.maverickart.co.uk).

The familiar appearance of the brush belies an extraordinary history of human-object relations which is only hinted at by the addition of the tally marks. This customization through usage, together with its unusual history, transformed it from a mass-produced object into a decommmodified social thing. Similarly to the atom bomb-scarred tricycle on display at the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum, 'Taken out of quotidian practice, it invokes and evokes ordinary events and their extraordinary disruption' (Clark 2009, p. 514–515). There can be little doubt that this once ordinary item has potential to offer much as a museum object, providing an unofficial insight into the everyday experiences of a soldier in Afghanistan in the early twenty-first century. However, whether it will be accessioned by a museum or preserved by the soldier as a relic of his time in Afghanistan is unknown. In the domestic setting, it may become an important heirloom, playing a role in framing personal and family cosmologies, or it may simply be returned to its default fate of DIY, perhaps languishing forgotten in a repurposed mug under a kitchen sink or in a garden shed.

Such items may be of 'immense interpretive value' (Schofield et al 2002, p. 4) within museum displays as well as being of significant sociological and historical interest. As archaeologists John Schofield and his co-authors (*ibid.*, p. 7) argue, 'Some material records are central to developing a knowledge of warriors and societies at war that official histories and some archives don't address. What were these combatants like; how did they behave in time of war; how was the world through their eyes?'

Writing about donations to the In Flanders Fields Museum made by the descendants of soldiers who served in the First World War, Dominiek Dendooven also argues that this potentially ephemeral material legacy has evocative and affective potential for museum displays, helping the general public to grasp experiences they can barely imagine:

Experiences can never be duplicated or revived, and the visceral life-and-death conditions of war are forever beyond reclaim by those who took no part in the struggles. Herein lies the beauty and the power of conflict-related objects, some of which withstand the ravages of time in ways that memories do not. The past may be gone, but sometimes objects retain the power to evoke aspects of that past which gave birth to them, and thereby connect us to our own private and collective histories. Such objects provide us with something to hold on to – they provide emotional and intellectual purchase, turning back the clock of memory. (Dendooven 2009, p. 63)

Dendooven (2009, p. 66) notes that such bequests are often motivated by the fear that with the death of the original owner, the 'meaning of these objects will fade away, and that perhaps one day the object will no longer be recognized as a meaningful war souvenir and will be discarded or sold.' Although donation removes the object from the familial context, it is assumed that 'If the museum accepts the gift, the donor can be sure that the

object will be preserved – in theory for eternity and in good condition' (ibid.). In this way, the donation serves to memorialise the relative as well as make their unique human-object experiences accessible to the public.

According to Susan Stewart (1993, p. 135–136), the efficacy of souvenirs comes from their ability to engender a narrative of origin. For Dendooven (2009, p. 66) the recording of such stories must be an integral part of the accessioning process. Such discourses may combine accounts of how the objects were initially acquired and used with reminiscences regarding what role they subsequently played within the family. As Dendooven (ibid.) notes, 'The power of such objects to embody and reconfigure persona and family memories, emotions and crosscutting ideas of identity and genealogy are astonishing as they are currently undocumented.' These items may have 'acquired a patina of emotion' (ibid.), which is obvious to their owners but which might require careful interpretation to maximise their affective potential in the museum setting.

Carol A Kidron's ethnographic studies of the relationships between Holocaust survivors and their descendants suggest that such war trophies or souvenirs taken 'in flight from the deathworld' (Kidron 2012, p. 11) by the survivor generation may 'act as key conduits' (ibid., p. 17) in the mediation of the non-narrative, intergenerational transmission of the traumatic past through a range of embodied object-person interactions within the domestic setting. These 'micro-local sites of memory' help in the 'embedding of the non-pathological presence of the Holocaust past within silent embodied practices' which serve to 'sustain familial 'lived memory' and to transmit tacit knowledge of the past within the everyday private social milieu' (ibid., p. 7). For example, rather than existing as a morbid presence in her home, Michelle's soup spoon, liberated from Auschwitz and used daily to feed her daughter, functioned as a symbol of survival with which her triumph over this near-death experience could be 'routinely re-enacted' (Kidron 2012, p. 11–12).

Although Rifleman Hiles' IED brush was taken with him to Afghanistan rather than acquired there, it nevertheless acts as a reminder of his having survived the detection of at least four significant explosive devices. It is not unreasonable to conjecture that his brush and knife may become significant material referents through which he recounts his experiences in Afghanistan upon return to the domestic setting. Whether it will be possible to 're-enact' the brush through embodied object-person relations in the same way as Michelle did with her spoon is less clear and this question may offer potential for further research.

Kidron (2012, p. 18) has identified a reluctance amongst Holocaust survivors to relinquish their 'deathworld' souvenirs to museums for public display. This tension between private memory practices and public display is further attested to by Chaim Sztajer's ambivalence and possessiveness regarding the display of his model of the Treblinka death camp at the Jewish Holocaust Museum in Melbourne. He is said to have been dismayed at the addition of a glass vitrine, perhaps because he felt unable to access the memories of his exterminated daughter he felt it embodied in the same way as he had when it had been kept at home (Witcomb 2011, p. 47). Kidron (2012, p. 18) also raises concerns regarding the fate of these items as the survivor generation dies. Whilst their children have a tacit understanding of these objects, their grandchildren often have not been privy to these memory practices. It is likely that these once non-verbal relations will have to be explained through a narrative process which fixes them in time and space. To remedy this, it is noted that elderly survivors are increasingly donating 'copies' of these souvenirs to local museums-cum-community centres in Israel so that the domestic contexts of the original items can be maintained while the community can also access this inheritance (ibid., p. 19). Kidron (ibid.) suggests that these centres 'might be explored as niches of intimate materiality in the meso-public domain in which familial interaction can be sustained outside the home without totally sacrificing the mundane living context that has preserved them.'

Rifleman Hiles' IED Brush, the ceramic interpretation of the original object, is a necessarily imperfect attempt to counter this problem of the entropy of private memory, where embodied practices recounted as a narrative by the soldier have been partially reconstructed and translated into a potentially enduring and dramatised ceramic form. Whilst it is impossible to recapture the soldier's person-object experiences with the

original item, this work attempts to disinter and monumentalise this story. While the printed tally marks on the ceramic brush hint at its unusual meaning, the work requires an interpretive narrative, and consequently embodies the limitations of my approach. Like Michelle's spoon, the power of the original brush is in its 'material functionality' (ibid., p. 12) which enables us to empathetically imagine what it might have been like to perform route clearing in Afghanistan. Petrified in ceramic, it no longer functions in this manner. Instead, it is an attempt to freeze (Sarmiento 2011, p. 58), or preserve, the story of how an ordinary object came to be used in an extraordinary way. Here, the 'lived memory' (Kidron 2012, p. 18) of Rifleman Hiles is replaced by a monumental, crystallised (Nora 1989, p. 7 cited in ibid., p. 18) form of public memory (see McHugh 2013, p. 80–81). While Michelle's spoon was 'woven into the daily practices of the home', thereby perpetually 'inscribing' the experience of survival (Kidron 2012, p. 12), how the soldier will use his brush away from Afghanistan is unknown. While we cannot predict what will become of this item, an attempt has been made to preserve its extraordinary history through the creation of an artwork and corresponding narrative. Although it is likely that this work will be 'displayed behind glass in frozen sites' (ibid.), this copy means that the original item may potentially go on to perform its silent human-object relations in the domestic setting.

Tattooed pots

A series of jugs made during my research employ a familiar form, which is well-represented in the SMWG's pottery collection, as a medium with which to display a range of narrative and visual information through surface decoration. Some of these jugs present imagery developed from the 3 Rifles focus group, focusing on the soldiers' commemorative tattoos and lucky charms. According to sociologist Les Back (2004, p. 29), tattooing 'involves perforating the boundary between the internal and the external so that the external becomes internal and the internal becomes external.' By committing these tattoos to the surface of pots, the private commemorative practices of the soldiers are made public through a process where ceramic decals are incorporated into the object by being fused into the surface glaze.

The soldiers' tattoos tend to commemorate fallen comrades or deceased family members and, like the 'tattooed' ceramic vessels, these marks introduced into their corporeality act as 'semi-durable' (Pennell 2010, p.40, see also Ingold 2013, p. 94) reminders of the presence of absence. Back's (2004, p. 49) study of the white working-classes of Britain suggests that for this population tattooing provides a hitherto under-appreciated non-verbal means of expressing love and affection, where 'the body becomes a figure through which emotions, affinities, and devotions are inscribed.' The embodied and silent nature of these expressions means that they have often been overlooked, and consequently, the 'complexity' of the 'emotional lives' they represent is 'lost, ignored, or disparaged' (ibid., p. 32). Although these tattoos may last a lifetime, upon death they decay and these records of emotion are lost, possibly to be replaced by similar commemorations in the skin of younger generations. As Back concludes:

The lines in these tattoos touch permanence but cannot grasp eternity. This has a double consequence for working-class expression because this is often the only medium through which their stories are told. [...] As the cadavers disappear, the traces of their embodied history, of life and love, are lost – they become The Nameless. They pass through hospital wards to the crematoria, to be remembered in the inscriptions made on young flesh that will in turn grow old. (Back 2004, p. 51)

Kevin McSorley and Sarah Maltby (2012, p. 3), argue that the somatic aspects of contemporary warfare, including the inherent harm it causes to bodies, are similarly often denied by dominant discourses. 'The reality

of war [they contend] is not just politics by any other means but politics incarnate, politics written on and experienced through the thinking, feeling bodies of men and women' (ibid.). The 'tattooed' jugs attempt to make the embodied shrines of the soldiers into accessible objects which will endure longer than the flesh and around which, it is hoped, a public discourse might emerge.

A consistent theme of *Sensing War*, an interdisciplinary conference organised by the University of Portsmouth in June 2014, was the difficulty of communicating the sensory experiences of war through language (Sensing War 2014). Conference organiser Kevin McSorley (2012, p. 48) has also previously noted that 'the visual grammar that increasingly dominates the contemporary mediascape of the Afghanistan war is lo-fi, intimate, and messy', and inextricably linked to the 'embodied experiences of soldiering'. Whilst acknowledging the difficulty of trying to capture that which is almost impossible to apprehend, the works described above aim to represent the manner in which soldiers coped with the experiences of war and its aftermath through such somatic experiences, presenting this information in a literally 'graspable' form (cf. Connerton 2009, p. 124).

Although these works may require a narrative explanation, they may also be experienced somatically - visually and through touch. As Zachary Beckstead et al (2011, p. 199) note in their discussion of collective remembering and war memorials, it is through the materiality of things and their aesthetic surfaces that 'normally inaccessible feelings' and 'moments of deep affective relevance' are obtained. For Buchli and Lucas (2001b, p. 82), the challenge is to produce a memorial which succeeds in balancing the private need to cope with traumatic experiences with the public requirements of testimony and catharsis. Such a balance might be found in the Massachusetts Vietnam Veterans Memorial, where the incorporation into the architecture of the final letters home of the deceased creates a 'powerful empathic response' (Beckstead et al 2011, p. 202–206), focusing on 'intimate deaths' (ibid., p. 202) and avoiding the jingoism characteristic of many official monuments. Works like *Rifleman Hiles' IED Brush* and the jugs similarly mark an attempt to disseminate individual experiences in the form of publicly accessible artworks, exploring this tension between remembering and forgetting.

Nevertheless, these ceramic works remain static monuments and are once removed from the lived memory of the informants. I have previously discussed how other ceramic items I made as part of my research, notably a pair of jugs made in collaboration with descendants of two nineteenth century Sunderland potters, went on to become activated as loci of remembrance through digital social networking (McHugh 2013; 2016). It is possible that such an approach could also be taken here to animate these pieces. Meanwhile, the question of how non-narrative embodied practice might be addressed by creative ceramics is worthy of further consideration.

Conclusion - ceramics as 'incavation'

The deliberate burial, or incavation, of objects has been practised for millennia in a variety of contexts, including by artists like Claes Oldenburg (Holtorf 2004, p. 48) and Antony Gormley. For archaeologist Cornelius Holtorf (2004), his experiment in incavation is at once archaeological and artistic, leading him to note that, '[whether] one incavates or excavates, archaeologists, and indeed we all, construct the past and its remains like artisans create their craft' (ibid., p. 47). His burial of the remains of 'an extensive breakfast' enjoyed with his friends in Berlin, comprised offerings ranging from 'a cup of coffee with some coffee in it' in Trench 3 to 'an eggcup with some egg shells and a little spoon' in Trench 7 (ibid., p. 45). As such, it is as much a material record of the event as it is an attempt to highlight the 'multitemporality' of the archaeological process, where the artefacts and the site, a town house built in 1899, are 'of the present but also of various pasts and futures' (ibid., p. 47). Holtorf justifies this deposition as providing a 'proactive contribution to the historic process of rendering both the context and the artefact relevant and meaningful in changing and diverse presents' (ibid., p. 48), a rationale which might equally be used to explain the production of new artworks, particularly those based on objects in a museum collection.

Whilst my project certainly tried to communicate something about contemporary Sunderland by producing a material offering to be left behind for the future, it necessarily did not aim to make a comprehensive material archive in ceramic. Rather, by focusing on certain aspects of human-object relationships, it employed the materiality of clay and fired ceramic to raise awareness of some potentially over-looked examples of human experience. As previously discussed, the approach can perhaps be likened more to Buchli and Lucas' proactive materialising project:

If anything, this is an archaeology of the future, if we take such an oxymoron seriously. Not so much in the sense of 'doing the job' for archaeologists of the future [...], but in the sense of creating the future by being actively engaged in the materialisation of the present – as much as designers, for example. (Buchli and Lucas 2001a, p.9)

Although no objects have been incavated as part of this project, the process where clay is imbued with contextual information through the manipulation of form and surface with a view to preserving something in fired ceramic can perhaps be described as a metaphorical incavation. An attempt has been made to link the past, present and future through reference to the historical collection and the present community. When asked about this tentative definition, Holtorf (2013, pers. comm.) replied that a condition of incavation is the possibility of future rediscovery or disinterment: 'Whether or not a ceramic work is an incavation depends in my view a lot on what you mean by that. For me, an incavation is an act that presupposes the possibility (though not necessarily reality) of subsequent excavation. But I do not own the term...'

The items made during this project may become accessioned by the museum or collected privately. They may be regularly exhibited or may wait in store rooms to be 'dug up' and re-discovered at times when they offer topical display potential or contextual resonance. Alternatively, they may become broken, discarded or lost, possibly entering the archaeological record as in the case of *Crimson Jug*, one of my other works which went missing at an art fair in Shanghai in 2013 (McHugh 2016).

Indeed, it is necessary to acknowledge Ingold's (2013, p.102) critique of Olsen's (2010, above) assertion of the innate endurance of the material world. For Ingold (ibid., p.94), pots are susceptible to the same kind of 'chronic instability' as the human body, facing the ever present threat of 'dissolution or metamorphosis', and constantly demanding 'vigilance' and care. Glen R Brown (2012) similarly likens pots to living entities, arguing that 'the natural life of a functional ceramic vessel, like that of something literally alive, is fraught with risk'. Much like the transfer-printed items in the Sunderland collection, the interpretation of some of the ceramic objects made during this research may be assisted by information carried in surface decoration. The reading of others, however, notably *Rifleman Hiles' IED Brush*, for example, will require the kind of contextual information provided by museum accession notes. Nevertheless, that they have been brought into being opens up the possibility of their future rediscovery and reactivation through excavation, metaphorical or actual. The challenge is in how the pots might be interpreted subsequently and be sustained as cultural processes, or 'things', rather than merely as material remains.

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